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THE UNION LABEL.

BY M. E. J. KELLEY.

THE development of industry and the progress of economic thought have lately evolved in the union label an economic force which promises to grow constantly stronger as it becomes more widely known. It is sufficiently interesting, at any rate, to deserve more attention than it has hitherto received. Although the union label has been a valuable factor in strengthening three of the most powerful of the American trade-unions, and has exerted an incalculable influence in bringing about some changes that are of serious importance to society as a whole, it is within a year that it has begun to be noticed at all by the students of economics, or by anybody else outside the trade-unions. No mention of the label appears in any of the books on economics or sociology. Even Professor Ely, who has written exhaustively on the labor movement in America, apparently has never heard of the union label. The past year, however, has worked wonders for the spread of the label's particular light outside the ranks of the workers. Lectures on the subject have been delivered before the students of economics at Columbia, and one of the students has the label for his thesis. The National Labor Bureau has commissioned a special agent to investigate the union label. Consumers' Leagues, whose membership consists of wealthy buyers, have discussed it exhaustively. Evidently its day is near at hand.

To a great extent, no doubt, its neglect is due to the fact that American students of economics are forever studying the history of the English labor movement, with the conviction that the American organizations are bound to develop on identical lines, and that, given a similar situation, the step taken by the English unions twenty-five or thirty years ago is bound to be

followed by the American organizations of the present. They quite overlook differences in the American character and situation. The union label had never been heard of in England until a couple of years ago, when two delegates from the American Federation of Labor expatiated on its advantages at the convention of British and Irish trade-unions.

The union label is a distinctively American product. It originated with the cigarmakers, who used it at first on the Pacific Coast in the later seventies as a means of protection against Chinese industry, which was flooding the California markets with cigars and threatening to drive the white cigarmakers to starvation wages in order to compete with it. The feeling against the Chinese was particularly strong just then, and an appeal was made to the smoking public on æsthetic and sanitary, as well as ethical, grounds. Men were urged not to purchase goods made by leprous Chinese under all sorts of unhealthful conditions, but instead to buy the products of well-paid white citizens employed at living wages in decent shops. To distinguish the cigars made by the white workmen from those made by the Chinese the local cigarmakers' union issued a label, a strip of blue paper bearing the union seal, which was pasted around the cigar box after the fashion of the revenue stamp. The label was welcomed by the manufacturer, because with the public state of mind on the Chinese question its use meant increased sales of his wares. On the whole, the device of the California cigarmakers was so successful that it was adopted by the International Cigarmakers' Union at its next convention, and its use has extended gradually until now "blue label" cigars are common all over the country. The Cigarmakers' Union issues on an average about 20,000,000 blue labels annually. These labels are given on demand to any manufacturer who complies with the rules of the union as to wages and hours of labor. Besides indicating that the goods were made by members of a trade-union receiving fair wages, the union label is usually considered a guarantee that the article on which it appears was made in a factory complying with the factory laws, and not in a sweatshop or tenement. Occasionally, however, less stress is laid on this point than is desirable from the consumer's point of view.

Labels have been adopted by more than twenty national trade-unions, and they represent all stages of development. All

the labels indicate a struggle for improved conditions. Some of them represent partial attainment. In most cases particular abuses have called the label into being and it is chiefly valuable at present as an indication that a certain evil has been abolished in the cases where the label is in use.

The hatters were the first to follow the example of the cigar-makers by the adoption of a label to distinguish the hats made in "fair" shops from those made in "unfair" establishments. Twelve years ago, at a national convention, an inch square of buff paper, perforated around the edges like a postage stamp, was adopted as the hatters' union label. It is sewed under the sweatband of the hat. A majority of hat manufacturers employ union men and the label is in use wherever there is any demand for it. All grades of men's hats from the cheapest to the most expensive may be had with the label in them.

The National Garment Workers' Union has a cambric label an inch wide by two inches long, which is stitched into the pockets of men's and boys' suits and overcoats. About five millions of these labels are used each year. One-fifth of all the clothing made in the United States bears the union label. The demand for the label on ready-made clothing has been worked up within the past three or four years. The Garment Workers' Union was organized only six years ago with 250 members. Its membership in 1896 was estimated at 40,000.

Within the past five or six years labels have been adopted by the bakers, tack-makers, iron moulders, shoemakers, coopers, beer brewers, horseshoe nail makers, wagon-makers, broom makers, collar and cuff makers, canners of domestic sardines, and a number of other trades. If one rides in a carriage one may have a union label on the horse's collar, if one insists, and on one's coupe or brougham. If one is an enthusiast on the subject it is quite possible to help create a demand for union labels by refusing to wear shoes, hats, collars, cuffs or coats or trousers which do not carry on them the union workman's guarantee of fair making. Custom tailors and custom shoemakers have union labels, as well as those who make the ready-made articles. Housekeepers have it in their power to make or unmake the bakers, broom-makers, and a host of other trade-unions. They may if they choose serve their families with union labelled bread and crackers, union-labelled canned vegetables and

fruit. The housewife may put down her carpet with union-labelled tacks, sweep it with union-labelled brooms, and set a union-labelled stove upon it. If one elects to do so one may patronize union-labelled shops. The retail salesmen have a button which they wear indicating membership in the Retail Clerk's Union. The Barbers' Union issues a card to master barbers who pay union wages and keep union hours. The card is hung in a conspicuous place in the shop or in the shop window.

The union label appears more frequently on goods used by working people than on those in demand among the well-to-do. The reason for this is simple. The demand for articles bearing the union label originated with members of trade-unions acting in their capacity as consumers, and so far very few outside the working class have taken any interest in the union label. In fact until recently it was practically unknown outside the trade-unions. Overalls are the great staple for labels. They come under the head of ready-made clothing, of course, and the Garment Workers' Union issues the label, but overall making is a distinct branch of the business. Indeed, the ready-made garment trade is exceedingly interesting as an example of the extreme to which the subdivision of labor has been carried. It is very rarely that a manufacturer makes more than one distinct kind of goods. No workman nowadays ever works on men's coats and trousers and children's jackets, for instance, as he might have done thirty years ago. These different garments are made in widely separated shops by different people. And no one person makes a whole garment. One cuts it, another runs the seams, another hems, another bastes, another makes pockets. A coat passes through at least twenty hands in the process of making. The Garment Workers' Union is an amalgamation of numerous branches, each composed of workers employed at some particular division of the work.

But to return to overalls, which, of course, are articles used exclusively by working men. It is hardly possible to buy a pair without the union label. The "scab" and the man who considers the union a great engine of oppression and injustice are likely to come in contact with evidence of its success every time he puts his hand in his overall pocket. The supply of overalls seems to come from half a dozen immense factories where thousands of women are employed. In this case the union label guarantees to

the purchaser that the garments were made under conditions several hundred per cent. better than those which prevail in other branches of the ready-made garment trade.

There are few or no union labels on women's ready-made clothing or other articles used exclusively by women, or made only by them. There are two causes for this. Neither men nor women have yet come to a realization of the economic importance of women either in production or consumption. Women as producers are unorganized and they fail to appreciate their importance as purchasers for themselves and their families. Before there can be a union label there must first be a trade-union which shall adopt a label to be given to manufacturers who are willing to enter into an agreement with the union to provide what the workers and employers agree to be fair conditions. And before the union label can be of consequence in making or sustaining fair conditions there must be a purchasing public interested in creating a demand for it.

Six years ago the International Typographical Union adopted a device which may be printed on all work done in a union office. Most of the offices, in the larger cities at any rate, employ only members of the union, so that if there were a concerted demand for this evidence of harmony between employer and employed it could be obtained. Public sentiment has not been aroused on the subject as yet, however, and there is no such demand. Handbills and pamphlets printed for unions or social reform organizations usually bear the printer's label, and in many small cities daily and weekly newspapers have the device printed at the head of their editorial columns. The printers' label, however, seems to have greater possibilities as a political force than any other. Forty city councils scattered over the country have passed ordinances requiring the union label on all municipal printing. The Montana Legislature recently passed a law requiring the label on public printing done throughout the State. Boston's city printing is done by union printers, and the plant is under municipal control.

Other unions have succeeded, in a measure, in getting recognition for their labels from local governing bodies. The Common Council of Utica has passed an ordinance that no iron moulding shall be used in public buildings which does not bear the iron moulders' label.

Such municipal ordinances are the result of concerted action on the part of local federations of unions in various trades. They demand, as citizen taxpayers and voters, that laws previously passed by State legislatures requiring payment of prevailing wages and the employment of adult-citizen labor on all public works shall be enforced in local contracts, and that as evidence that the law is not being evaded the union's trade-mark shall appear wherever it can be used.

It is interesting to observe the extent to which the law has taken cognizance of the union label. The first objection raised by the sympathetic outsider whose attention has been called to the union label as a means of improving the conditions under which workmen are employed is: "How shall we know a label is genuine? May not anybody put a label on his goods and say it stands for fair conditions?" Nearly every State in the Union where goods are made by organized workmen, or where such goods are sold, has passed special laws protecting union labels from counterfeits and imitations. In some States the labels are registered and protected under the laws regulating trade-marks. In 1895 twenty-five States had laws protecting union labels, and as the number of States having such laws is constantly increasing, it is likely many others have been added to the list since. The protection given by the label laws is very great. In many States the union may invoke both civil and criminal law to punish offenders. The employer unable to get the right to use the label from the union, and yielding to the temptation to use a counterfeit or imitation, is liable to a year's imprisonment or a fine of \$200, or both. This is the maximum punishment. It is less in some States, and in practice the limit will probably never be imposed on an offender. The goods bearing the counterfeit label may be seized and destroyed. The union also has grounds for a civil suit for damages. Mr. C. F. Willard, a lawyer employed by several unions to look after the registration of labels, says that the most important feature of the laws relating to union labels has not yet been recognized, either by the unions or the manufacturers. "In granting protection to union labels of associations of workmen," says Mr. Willard, "the different States have recognized their right of property in such labels and in so doing have legalized the status of such associations or combinations. They recog-

nize the right of workingmen to combine into associations, which means virtually the abolition of the old conspiracy laws in those States which have passed laws to protect union labels. The label laws mean that the law recognizes the right of property on the part of the labor organizations in their label or trade-mark, and thus the right to hold property. They also mean that the wage-worker has been conceded the right to own and register a mark to be used on goods, which in a legal sense he does not own, but into which the labor of himself and of his fellows combined in unions enters as a predominating factor. These laws, by inference, thus establish the equity right of labor in the product owned by the employer."

The trade-union never urges the label upon an employer, and no employer ever applies to the union for the use of its label until he is confronted with a demand for it from a sufficient number of his customers to make it worth his while to have it placed on the goods he has for sale.

It must not be supposed, however, that the union sits still and waits for the employer to get ready to come around to the union office for the label. On the contrary, it is "perniciously active" in its efforts to influence him in an indirect way to adopt the label. The label is extensively advertised in the newspapers and labor organs. Pictures of the various labels and appeals to consumers to ask for goods bearing them are widely circulated among union men of all crafts and among their friends and sympathizers. Committees from local unions visit the shops of their towns and set forth to dealers the advantages of keeping union-labelled goods in stock, since the several hundred or thousand members whom they represent are pledged to give the preference in purchasing to such goods, and to dealers keeping them on hand. In small towns the patronage of the union men and their friends makes a material difference to the shopkeeper, and frequently, through him, to the manufacturer who supplies him with goods. In one of the smaller cities of New York State a baker's business experienced a boom as a result of the label agitation. At first he was the only boss baker who was willing to enter into a satisfactory agreement with the bakers' union and consequently was the only one who could get the bakers' label. The wives and mothers of the union men of the town were interested and took pains to buy none but bread bearing the union label, with the result that this

particular baker needed more help and the other bakers lost their trade. In many towns, particularly up in New York State and through the middle West, the wives of union men have been interested in the garment workers' grievances, and when they buy clothing for their little sons they insist upon having the label in the pockets of jackets and knickerbockers. The demand for childrens' clothing bearing the union label has been worked up to such an extent, through these smaller towns, that three large manufacturers in New York have within a year secured the label. Not long ago a manufacturing house up the Hudson went out of business, and one of the causes to which its failure was attributed was its refusal to make terms with the union, together with the persistent demand of its customers, the retailers, for union labelled goods, which their customers in turn insisted on having.

The demand for the union label is hardly sufficiently developed as yet to make it possible to estimate or predict its effect upon production. A universal demand for it, of course, would take away any advantage which its use at present gives to dealers or manufacturers. Not to have it would be a disadvantage, but having it would not add to one's customers.

The sum which it adds to the manufacturers' cost of production on any one article is infinitesimal. The cost of registering the labels in the various States, which amounts to about \$500, is borne entirely by the union owning the label. The cost of printing and making the labels is divided between the manufacturers and the union. The proportion varies with different unions. In the clothing trade the manufacturers pay two-thirds of the cost of the labels, or about \$200 a million. This means the addition of one five-thousandth of a cent to the cost of each garment. The cost and trouble to which the manufacturer is put to obtain the label is more than made up by the free advertising he gets through the union and the labor press, not to mention the additional customers who are secured by the use of the label.

The effect of the use of the label upon consumption will be to bring an ethical element into economic transactions, a result much to be desired according to the best economists. It is in the change which has come over economic thought in the last quarter of the century that the union label finds its justification. The stress is no longer on production or exchange but

upon consumption. The consumer, it is seen, is the real maker of goods. Whether goods shall be made under sweat-shop conditions, under conditions which mean the brutalization of the great mass of humanity, or under conditions which permit the development of all that is best in the workers, and which are the best conditions for the interests of society as a whole, depends upon the consumers and not upon the producers. When the ethical sense of the community is so highly developed that no one will wear a garment for which just wages have not been paid, the sweatshop will disappear.

In the present stage of development, the union label seems to fill a want, to meet a desire for some guarantee that the articles are what they are represented to be—made under fair conditions. The union label is probably only a temporary device, just as any present thing is adapted to present conditions, present circumstances, present evils. When conditions and circumstances change, it will give way to something else. It is not an ideal solution of labor problems. If it does not stand for all its newest friends think it should, it must be remembered that it is not fully matured. Like the trade-union, of which it is an outgrowth, it must be of slow development. It can grow no faster than those who use it. In its early days the trade-union was something quite unlike the present orderly, dignified, influential body, which is a powerful economic, social, and political force.

At first the union was little more than a temporarily organized mob, making, sometimes, unreasonable demands; thinking strikes and physical violence the only means of gaining its ends. With more leisure and better wages, gained in part by these destructive methods, the organized workers have come gradually to stand for peaceful measures and various reforms beneficial, not only to themselves, but to the body of which they are a part. In similar fashion the union label is developing. At first it meant simply that the makers of the articles bearing it were white men, not Chinese. A little later it said to the buyer: "These goods are made by a member of the union of the trade." The union man might be working in a two-room home, assisted by his family; that did not matter. Presently the union reached the stage where it became an ardent advocate of factory laws and waged war on child labor. Then the label began to mean that the article bearing it was made by a union man employed in a factory

governed by factory laws, receiving union wages and working eight hours or ten hours a day. It meant that the article was not made in a sweatshop or tenement house and that child labor was not employed in its making. In its very latest development the union label stands also for good workmanship. It signifies that the worker has reached the stage of growth where he takes sufficient pride in his work to put his best efforts into it. However desirable this qualification may be from a consumer's point of view, there are grave difficulties in the way of its fullest development under the present organization of industry. Labor is only a partner. The laborer has not full say in the matter of what he shall put into the goods he makes. It is desirable, from the consumer's point of view, that things shall be cheap. Possibly the only way to secure cheapness may be to put less work or inferior material into an article. Good workmanship requires much more time than poor workmanship. From the manufacturers' point of view, which is influenced always by the consumer's desires, it may be better to turn out a great deal of work not done in the best manner than to make a few beautifully finished articles. Exquisite finish takes more time, costs more and must be sold for more. Fewer people can afford to buy it, no matter how much they may admire it. The demand is reduced. Fewer articles are required. Probably fewer workmen will be needed to make the limited supply. It is doubtful whether it is a wise thing for the consumer friends of the union label to insist too strongly as yet that it shall stand for good workmanship. The old saw, "What is worth doing at all is worth doing well," is just as true as it ever was; but until the public taste has been educated through technical and art training, or in some other way, so that it will have nothing but what is in good taste and well done, and until our ethical standards have been raised to a point where getting more than one pays for will not be considered an evidence of good judgment and good business ability, it will be wiser not to insist too strongly on excellence of workmanship. For the consumer to say to the trade-unionist, "When you can assure us that the label stands for conscientious workmanship, just relations between workmen and employer, good sanitary conditions, enforced factory laws, etc., we will give you our hearty support," is like saying to the slave, "We see you are un-

justly treated ; we know you are weak and oppressed ; when you have broken your bonds and become strong we will help you to stay free, but we will not help you secure your freedom."

The consumer, of course, represents society as a whole. The producer who is to be helped by the union label represents only a part of society. And apparently it is only a very small fraction of the producers who will be benefited by the union label. The proportion of union men to non-unionists is about one to nine in England, and the proportion outside the union is much greater in the United States. The "scab," of course, is a consumer, and must be considered in any scheme which is to benefit society as a whole. The use of the union label will probably have much the same effect upon those outside the union that the trade-union itself has had upon the workers who have remained outside its organization. Invariably the non-unionist has shared in the improved conditions brought about by the efforts of the trade-unions. Factory laws, anti-truck laws, weekly payment laws, and much other legislation which protects all workingmen have been the result of trade-union activity. Public opinion has been largely the means of enforcing shorter hours in many occupations, half-holidays in the dry-goods shops, for instance, but the agitation was started by trade-unionists, and those outside labor organizations have shared in the benefits.

On the whole, it cannot be said that the union label is an ideal solution of vexing labor problems, or that it is likely to be final or permanent. It does, however, offer a means of utilizing the altruistic sense of a community to right some of the wrongs from which the producer suffers. It offers itself as an infinitely superior substitute for the strike and the boycott. It brings employer and workman together on a footing of common interest. The employer finds it is to his interest to see that the conditions under which his workmen are employed are fair. Closer relations are sure to bring about improved methods of settling differences. The label builds up the fair employer's trade instead of tearing down the unfair man's business, as did the boycott. The union label is constructive, not destructive. In this fact is its most vital principle, and a promise of extensive and progressive development.

M. E. J. KELLEY.